

Additional written evidence to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into children's social care

The Fostering Network

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity and membership organisation. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children. We support foster carers to transform children's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice. We work to ensure all fostered children and young people experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change so that foster care is the very best it can be. We have been leading the fostering agenda for 50 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level.

Summary of our previous contributions to this inquiry

The Fostering Network submitted our [initial written evidence](#) to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into children's social care in January 2024.

Our CEO Sarah Thomas gave oral evidence to the committee on 16 April 2024. She covered several key issues facing foster care such as the fostering recruitment and retention crisis, the need for improved early intervention measures and the importance of a national register for foster carers.

Robin Walker MP's correspondence to the previous Children's Minister, after the Committee was dissolved, raised the following points of importance on foster care which we welcomed¹:

- A national register for foster carers, as exists for social workers, must be considered as a means to improve recruitment and retention, best-practice and oversight.
- A national recruitment campaign should be considered, for both social workers and foster carers.
- Local and national Government must work alongside providers to reduce the number of children being placed with foster carers outside of their local area, so they can remain close to pre-existing relationships and support systems.
- Early intervention has fallen by £3.7 billion since 2010-11. This trend must be reversed in order to prevent rising numbers of children entering the care system in the future.

New evidence

Since April 2024, we have completed our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster care survey. This is the largest and most comprehensive study of the UK's fostering sector which we conduct every

¹ Robin Walker MP (2024) [Correspondence to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children, Families and Wellbeing on the Committee's inquiry into Children's social care](#)

3 years. We had over 3,000 responses to the survey from current and former foster carers and 114 from fostering services across the UK. The full report will be published on 11th February 2025, but we share some of the findings here.

Since the General Election, the new Government has outlined commitments to improving children's social care through the 'Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive' policy paper, the 2025-26 budget and local government finance settlement, and The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024. Whilst we welcome these measures, this evidence will assess if they are sufficient to address the key issues facing foster carers and children and young people in foster care.

Summary of key points

This additional written evidence seeks to respond to the three questions set out by the Committee:

1. Is the current provision of children's social care sufficient to meet demand?
 2. What is your assessment of the 'Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive' policy paper and The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill
 3. What measures can be undertaken to improve early intervention?
- There continues to be declining numbers of fostering households which is having an impact on care experienced children and young people who are not being placed in fostering households which are local, near their family or that meet their needs. We need highly skilled foster families to care for children locally to maintain existing connections and support. Our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Carer survey showed that there are three main reasons foster carers are leaving the role. A lack of support, inadequate financial support and foster carers not feeling respected or valued in their role are the main reasons cited.
 - Our report on foster carer fees published in September 2024 showed that foster carers experience a postcode lottery on fees - some local authorities provide as little as £18 a week, and others as much as £750 a week, - a maximum difference of £38,000 per year.
 - The Fostering Network believes that a national register for foster carers would improve matching and sufficiency, safeguard children, increase the portability of foster carers and improve foster carer's status. Work on introducing a register is making progress in other nations of the UK and should be prioritised by the Government, as per the recommendation of the previous chair of the Education Select Committee.
 - The Fostering Network is currently supporting 116 fostering services to grow and sustain Mockingbird, with most services working towards additional constellation launches. Our recent programme data and data from our State of the Nations survey 2024 continue to show positive outcomes in terms of increased retention of carers and stability for children, as well as a range of other outcomes. We welcome the announcements to roll out recruitment hubs in every local authority in England and urge the Government to commit to ensuring these new hubs are also funded to set up Mockingbird constellations in the Spending Review for 26-29.

- We welcome the Government’s ‘Keeping children safe, helping families thrive’ policy paper, and the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which promise increased financial investment and set out legislation to support early intervention provision and actions to reduce profiteering in the sector. However, we believe the Government needs to go further to focus on fostering, they should bring forward previous progress on extending Staying Put to age 23, legislate to give foster carers delegated authority by default, and improve foster carer’s learning and development.
- We welcome the mandating of Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) across local authorities. Facilitating families to work together to make decisions in the best interests of children is crucial. We believe the government should consider how our Step Up Step Down programme can be utilised to provide essential tools for families to help children on the edge of care remain with their birth families.

1. Is the current provision of children’s social care sufficient to meet demand?

The current provision of children’s social care is not sufficient to meet the needs of children and young people coming into care in the UK. Our previous submissions to this inquiry outlined the extent of the current foster carer recruitment and retention crisis. The latest Ofsted statistics show that the overall loss of foster carers has continued for the third consecutive year - 42,615 fostering households in England in 2024, compared to 45,370 in 2021. A total of 4,055 fostering households were approved from 2023-24 while 4,820 stopped fostering - an overall loss of 765 fostering households.² The Fostering Network estimates that a further 6,500 fostering families are needed in England to ensure all fostered children can live with the right family for their needs.

At the same time, the number of children in care has been rising steadily over the past five years (though declined by 0.5% in England). Over 83,000 children were in the care system in England in 2024 with 33,000 children coming into care in England between 2023 and 2024 - that is one child coming into care every 16 minutes. 70% of children in care live in a foster family.

An insufficiency of foster carers in England is leading to increasing numbers of children being placed out-of-area, in residential homes, and, being separated from their siblings. 45% of children in care were placed outside of their council boundary in 2024 – up from 41% in 2020. Additionally, in 2022, one third of children were placed in residential care when their care plan was for foster care and 37% of children were separated from their siblings.³

Foster carer recruitment

Since January, the Department for Education (DfE) has launched ten fostering recruitment hubs. The hubs now include around 96 of the 152 (64%) local authorities who have joined together in regional clusters to redesign the journey of the prospective foster carer, from the moment of initial contact, through to becoming a foster carer, as well as providing support

² Ofsted (2024) [Fostering in England 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024](#).

³ Ofsted (2022) [‘Why children go into children’s homes’](#); Children’s Commissioner (2023) [‘Siblings in Care’](#).

through each stage with the aim of increasing the number of foster carers in the system, both new and retained.

The 'Keeping children safe, helping families thrive' policy paper announced £15 million to boost the number of foster carers. £4 million of this will be invested into rolling out new hubs and £11million has been set out in the local government finance statement to continue the funding of existing hubs. This investment is a step in the right direction, but we also need to focus on retaining the many brilliant carers we have.

Most regional recruitment hubs have not been functioning for a significant period of time so it is difficult to know how much this regional approach will improve foster carer recruitment in the long-term. Data from the hubs has not yet shown a significant increase in turning enquiries and applications to foster into approved foster carers.

Ofsted data shows that the number of applications received from prospective fostering households in 2023 to 2024 was around 8,500. This is an increase from the previous year when it was around 8,000. However, the proportion of approved applications remains at the same level as last year. It should be noted that during the data collection period of the 2024 Ofsted Fostering in England statistics, many of the hubs had not been running for long or had not yet launched.

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill seeks to address the crisis in foster carer recruitment through Regional Care Co-operatives whose strategic accommodation functions include 'recruiting prospective local authority foster parents and supporting local authority foster parents'. It is currently unclear what this support will include. Our 2023 research into recruitment and retention in England showed that the Government must improve financial support, have less social worker turnover and value and respect the role of foster carers more highly to recruit more foster carers.⁴

Both our research on allowances and new report on fees (see below) show there is huge variation in both fees and allowances that foster carers are receiving in neighbouring local authorities or across regions. We therefore would recommend that the regional hubs work towards harmonisation of fees and allowances to ensure fairness and transparency across local areas.

It is clear that there needs to be investment in foster carer recruitment beyond the regional recruitment hubs to ensure that children can find loving homes close to the people they know and trust. The previous chair of the Education Select Committee, Robin Walker MP, in his letter to the previous Children's Minister has joined many people in the sector calling on a national recruitment campaign for foster carers.

Recommendations for the Government:

- a) The Government should invest in a national recruitment campaign to increase the pool of available carers and enable children to stay close to home. We want to see a more

⁴ The Fostering Network (2023) [Foster carer retention and recruitment in England](#).

personal and child centered approach when a foster carer picks up the phone to enquire about fostering.

Recommendations for Governments and services:

- b) Co-design recruitment campaigns with foster carers which:
 - a. Focus on outcomes for children, and emphasise the power of foster carers to make a difference to their lives
 - b. Target underrepresented groups including culturally diverse backgrounds
 - c. Emphasise the support available to foster carers
 - d. Tackle negative stereotypes about care experienced children.
- c) Keep abreast of the latest research in fostering recruitment and retention and embed good practice, including from the Centre for Evidence and Implementation's research and our forthcoming toolkit.⁵

Foster carer retention

Recent Ofsted statistics on foster care highlight that despite recent efforts to improve foster carer recruitment and retention, there are more foster carers leaving the role than joining. Despite declining applications and many leaving the role, the motivations to foster remain strong. Our 2024 State of the Nations' survey found that:

- 89% of foster carers said they foster to make a difference in the lives of children in their care.
- Two-thirds said they do it because they are committed to the children they are fostering or because they want to provide a family environment for children.

However, these motivations are not enough to retain those who are currently fostering. 60% of foster carers said they had considered resigning - 46% had thought about it, while 14% were actively weighing their decision.

Our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Carer survey showed that there are three main reasons foster carers are leaving the role. A lack of support, inadequate financial support and foster carers not feeling respected or valued in their role.

Support

One of the most critical factors in retaining foster carers is the quality of support they receive. From specialist or therapeutic support to peer groups and effective supervision, services that invest in fostering families see better retention rates. Our findings confirm this, carers who rated their support highly were significantly less likely to consider resigning.

Disappointingly, our survey showed that ratings of support have dropped in nearly every category since our 2021 survey:

⁵ Ott, E., Wills, E., Hall, A., & Gupta, S (2023) [Foster carer recruitment and retention in England](#). Centre for Evidence and Implementation and The Fostering Network.

- Only 35% of foster carers rated out-of-hours support as excellent or good, down from 42%.
- The proportion who rated support from fostering services in general as excellent or good also fell slightly, from 53% to 51%.
- Support from children's social workers received just 42% excellent or good ratings, down from 45%.

Of those contemplating resignation, 53% pointed to burnout or wellbeing issues as key reasons, highlighting the urgent need for better support systems to be put in place.

High turnover among social workers also remains a significant challenge. Foster carers reported having an average of 2.2 supervising social workers in the past 24 months. Only 44% had the same social worker during this period, while 28% had two, and 15% had three.

Finances

The cost-of-living crisis and limited uplifts to financial support for foster carers is making it harder than ever for foster carers to provide for the children in their care.

In the local government finance settlement, the government announced a 3.55 per cent increase to the national minimum allowance (NMA) for foster carers in England. While we welcome the increased financial support for fostering families, it doesn't go far enough to cover the full costs of caring for a child in foster care.

Each year the government increases the NMA in line with inflation and what is affordable for local government. While inflation was lower this year, and the 3.55 per cent uplift exceeds inflation, the rates are still too low after decades of underfunding and the increasing cost of living.

- **Allowances falling short:** Only one in three carers said fostering allowances covered the full cost of care, a sharp drop from over half in 2021.
- **Inadequate fees:** Only a quarter of foster carers said their fee is sufficient to cover their essential living costs, and two thirds receive no payment between placements, leaving them financially vulnerable during gaps in care.
- **Rising living costs:** Three-quarters of carers reported that the cost of living has had an impact on their fostering. Many are dipping into personal savings, relying on partners' incomes, or taking on additional work.

Below are some quotes from foster carers:

"The annual rate of inflation has gone up dramatically in comparison to the rise in the allowance, which already had shortfalls. This has resulted in most of the extra things, like after school clubs, swimming, playgroups, football clubs etc now are no longer possible."

"£12.00 a week goes nowhere these days to providing a growing child adequate clothing, shoes and uniform etc."

“The overall cost of living has increased but the allowances have remained low. Without benefits I would have to stop fostering.”

Foster carer fees

Since providing our initial evidence to the committee, we published [‘Out of Pocket: Fairer Fees for Foster Carers’](#) in September 2024 which focused on the low level and postcode lottery of foster carer fees across the UK.

Based on FOIs to local authorities, (LAs) for the period April 2023 to March 24, the findings (from 80% of LAs) show that an absence of a standardised fee system has resulted in both a large variation in foster carer fees and too many local authorities providing limited funds to their foster carers. Some local authorities provide as little as £18 a week and others as much as £750 a week - a maximum difference of £38,000 per year. LAs in England were found to have the largest disparity in how they provide fees to their foster carers – with two LAs providing no fees at all.

Fees must be competitive to bring more carers into the field as well as fit for purpose to ensure that anyone who wants to foster is financially supported to do so and not left out of pocket. This is particularly relevant if services want to attract a greater skill level into fostering and for the public to see fostering as a viable role.

Our 2024 State of the Nations Survey findings show that most foster carers do not work alongside their fostering role (around 60% in England, Scotland and Wales and 45% in Northern Ireland). In each nation, under 20% of foster carers are in full-time employment. For foster carers on low or no alternative income, insufficient fees could result in them not being able to meet the costs of living and in worst cases living in poverty.

Our report also found that 60% of local authorities increase their fee rates as foster carers are deemed to gain skills, either through attending training, completing qualifications or length of time being a foster carer. Our FOIs have shown that many foster carers on the lowest fees are those who are new to fostering or have not yet completed certain training. Local authorities and government officials must consider how providing new foster carers with very low fees impacts the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

Our FOIs found that where local authorities did not have tiered fee structures these fees were more consistent, both within local authorities and across the UK. In this report, we recommend that every foster carer, approved with LAs or IFAs and including kinship foster carers and post foster care carers, should receive the same consistent fee – a national recommended fee framework set by the Government.

On 27 November 2024, Jess Asato MP, in a parliamentary question to the Secretary of State for Education asked ‘if she will make an assessment of the potential merits of introducing a statutory minimum fee framework for foster carers.’⁶

The Children’s Minister responded that ‘there are no current plans to introduce a statutory minimum fee framework for foster carers.’ The response also stated that ‘fostering service

⁶ UK Parliament (2024) [Question for Department for Education. Foster Care: Pay.](#)

providers, including local authorities, have the flexibility to pay additional fees. Decisions to pay fees are therefore made independently by the fostering service provider. The department encourages all fostering service providers to regularly review the fees they pay to their foster carers to ensure they remain appropriate.’

Status and value

Foster carers provide a vital role, looking after children 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, yet many feel their contributions are overlooked and undervalued. According to our State of the Nations survey, two key themes emerged:

- a) Lack of Respect: Over half (54%) of carers considering leaving said they had experienced a lack of respect from other professionals within the team around the child.
- Exclusion from Decisions: Many carers feel excluded from key decisions about the children they foster, citing bureaucracy and poor communication as significant barriers.

A national register for foster carers

The Fostering Network believes that a national register for foster carers would improve matching and sufficiency, safeguard children, increase the portability of foster carers and improve foster carer’s status.

The register is making great progress in other nations of the UK. The Scottish Government is now consulting on introducing a register in its Future of Foster Care consultation which closes in February 2025.⁷ In Wales, the 2023 Radical Reform Inquiry by the Children, Young People and Education Committee recommended a national register for foster carers which the Welsh Government accepted.⁸ In October 2024, the Health and Social Care Committee’s Stage 1 Report on the Health and Social Care (Wales) Bill recommended that the Minister should amend the Bill to “make it mandatory for all foster carers to register with Social Care Wales.” The Government responded that they would explore further how this would work and add value but introducing such a change would require consultation with all parts of the sector so would be done outside of the Bill.

The register would make improvements to the matching of children and foster carers and support local authorities to meet their sufficiency duties. Through a register, local authority fostering services could be given access to information on the number of fostering households with vacancies for children in their local area, including those with independent fostering providers and in neighbouring local authorities.

The number of children in care in England moved outside their council boundary has increased from 41% in 2020 to 45% in 2024.⁹ A register would allow services to make matches more quickly at a local level and ultimately reduce out-of-area placements. We know it is best for children to be placed close to family and other support networks and not moved out of area.

⁷ Scottish Government (2024) Future of Foster Care Consultation, open until February 6th 2025.

⁸ Welsh Government (2023) Written Response by the Welsh Government to the report of the Children, Young People and Education Committee report entitled “If not now, then when? Radical reform for care-experienced children and young people”.

⁹ Department for Education (2024), [Children looked after in England including adoptions](#).

The register would also:

- **Safeguard children** – keep a central record of foster carers who have had their approval terminated for safeguarding reasons, ensuring they aren't re-approved by another service. The introduction of a register would go hand in hand with an accredited training framework and robust national standards of practice, improving the quality of care for children.
- **Improve foster carers' status and conditions** with a formal recognition for their role. Decisions on continued suitability to foster following an allegation would be made by a central registration body, ensuring greater impartiality and fairness. We also propose that registration should entitle all foster carers to a minimum level of fees and support.
- **Increase portability for foster carers** by enabling them to take their registration with them rather than having to repeat the approval process if they decide to move or foster for a different service. This would drive up standards of support for foster carers and give those who might be considering resigning an easier route to transferring service instead, improving retention.

There is widespread support from foster carers for a national register for foster carers. In our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care survey, excluding those who said they need more information (19%), 60% of foster carers said they support proposals to create a national register of foster carers, 14% oppose them, and 27% neither support nor oppose them. Of fostering service respondents, excluding those that need more information (21%), 42% said they support the proposals, 30% oppose them and 28% neither support nor oppose them.

Recommendations to the Government:

- a) Introduce a national register of foster carers to improve the matching of foster carers and young people, portability and status of the workforce, provide a standardisation of pre- and post-approval learning and development and improve safeguarding for children and young people.
- b) Carry out a comprehensive review of foster carer fees. Introduce, invest in, and monitor the delivery of a national recommended fee framework for foster carers, with fees to be paid for 52 weeks a year, including between placements and during allegation investigations. Commit to an inflationary uplift each year.
- c) Increase national minimum allowances for foster carers to match The Fostering Network's recommended rates, and commit to an inflationary uplift each year.
- d) Introduce a statutory minimum entitlement to leave for foster carers who work alongside their fostering, in line with our Fostering Friendly employers scheme (an amendment has currently been tabled to the Employment Rights Bill on this by Steve Darling MP).

Mockingbird

In our initial written submission we provided evidence on the plans to roll out our Mockingbird programme through the 10 recruitment and retention clusters. Since then, Mockingbird has continued to expand and has provided peer-support, learning and development and community-based care for even more families across England, mostly due to DfE investment in the hubs.

We are delighted that the Mockingbird community has just launched its 200th Constellation and the Mockingbird population is in a period of substantial growth. The Fostering Network is currently supporting 116 fostering services to grow and sustain Mockingbird, with most services working towards additional constellation launches. Our recent programme data and data from our State of the Nations survey 2024 continue to show positive outcomes in terms of increased retention of carers and stability for children, as well as a range of other outcomes.

Our internal evaluations of Mockingbird constellations running between 2018-23 shows that 9.5% of foster carers would have resigned and 16% of placements would have broken down if they hadn't been supported by the Mockingbird programme.

Case studies for members of Mockingbird constellations reinforce the necessity of this community to ensure effective support for foster carers. *“A satellite carer has a poorly family member currently. She is a single carer and has shared that she does not know if she would have been able to continue fostering without having the backup and support of the hub home. The young person has been for sleepovers and daycare this month to support the carer to also be able to support their family member.”*

Our 2024 State of the Nations' Foster Care survey also shows that Mockingbird members were significantly more likely to say they have never considered resigning from fostering (**49%**) compared to non-Mockingbird carers (**39%**). They were also significantly more likely to recommend fostering (**61%**) than non-members (45%).

Mockingbird carers were also significantly more likely to have access to an approved support network/ person who can provide overnight care for the child/ren they foster (**85%**) compared to non-Mockingbird carers (**45%**).

Mockingbird has supported fostering services to improve placement stability, improve the retention of foster carers and has prevented more children and young people entering into residential care. We have estimated that these improvements in outcomes and costs avoided has saved the government £6,428,413 in total from May 2018-March 2023.

We were pleased to see that part of the £11 million announced in the Local Government Settlement for recruitment and retention for 2025/2026 is for local authorities who are part of a recruitment and retention hub to spend on Mockingbird. We welcome the announcements to roll out recruitment hubs in every local authority in England and urge the Government to commit to ensuring these new hubs are also funded to set up Mockingbird constellations in the Spending Review for 26-29.

However, we must reiterate from our initial written evidence that Mockingbird is just one part of the retention puzzle, not the full solution. The model addresses key issues such as peer support and stability but it is not able to overcome all the wider problems within the fostering system contributing to foster carers leaving such as the inadequate funding framework and the lack of support within fostering services as detailed above in this submission and our initial written evidence.

Recommendation for the Government

- a) Invest to ensure that Mockingbird can be available in every local authority for the families that want to be part of it. This includes supporting services to sustain and grow Mockingbird where it is already set up and ensuring that implementation support is extended to services who are yet to offer Mockingbird through new regional hubs offer.

2. What impact are the Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive policy paper and The Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill likely to have on foster carers and children and young people in foster care?

The recent policy paper ‘Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive’ and its mission to give every child the best chance in life is a welcome step towards addressing key issues within children’s social care. There has been under-investment and lack of priority given to children’s social care for far too long and this is a much-needed reset. The £15 million announced to boost the number of foster carers is a step in the right direction.

We also welcome The Children’s Wellbeing and School’s Bill and its focus on early intervention, tackling profiteering in the sector and kinship care. However, both the policy paper and the Bill have a distinct lack of focus on foster care and do not bring forward key commitments from the independent review into children’s social care and the previous government’s strategy ‘Stable Homes, Built on Love’ as we outline below.

Staying Put

This policy paper and Bill, we believe, are missed opportunities to improve support for care leavers by extending the Staying Put scheme from the age of 21 to 23. Instead, the Bill extends Staying Close support to the age of 25 for any former relevant child. Staying Close provision includes help accessing suitable accommodation and accessing services to improve young people’s health and wellbeing, relationships and employment amongst other key areas.

Whilst we welcome this increased support for care leavers, it does not go far enough for young people in foster care who want to remain with their fostering family past the age of 21, but can’t because there is not the funding to support it.

In our initial written evidence, we stated that the extension of Staying Put is necessary as it is in a young person’s best interests to live in a family environment post-18 for their transition into adulthood and to be afforded the same support as their non-care experienced peers. On average, a young person doesn’t leave home until the age of 24 and the current cliff-edge that care leavers face puts them at a severe disadvantage when navigating adult life.

In July 2024, The Centre for Homelessness Impact published a report on Staying Put. The report found that Staying Put significantly lowers the risk of homelessness for care leavers.¹⁰ If the number of participants in the Staying Put scheme increased by just 13%, over 300 care leavers could be prevented from experiencing homelessness per year.

¹⁰ Centre for Homelessness Impact (2024) [The Impacts of Staying Put on Housing Outcomes for Young People Leaving Care](#).

A foster carer recently wrote to us in response to a letter from the Minister for Children and Families regarding not progressing the extension of Staying Put until 23. The foster carer told us:

“The increase in the age for staying put would be of amazing benefit to Care Leavers. At the age of 21 many who have had the opportunity to go to University are just obtaining their qualification and have to face negotiating the next huge step, the job market, and to find that they are possibly homeless due to leaving their placement is a catastrophic step backwards.

The cost of living is at its peak and to be able to secure decent accommodation in a safe area is way out of most young people’s reach, let alone at the age of 21, which is why so many young people are still living with their parents at that age. Care Leavers, in a majority of cases, do not have that choice unless their foster parents are prepared to continue to provide them with a home with no financial support from the state.

For others who are not, to have to leave this stable environment can only add to the trauma that they have suffered and is a huge step backwards. The report and [the previous government] recognised this and were prepared to take action.”

We urge the Committee to call on the Government to table an amendment to the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill to ensure parity with Staying Put and Staying Close, given the Government’s and widespread acknowledgement that foster care and a family home has the best long term outcomes for young people transitioning into adulthood.

Delegated authority

We were also disappointed that the recent policy statement did not progress the previous government’s plans set out in their ‘Stable Homes Built on Love’ strategy to introduce delegated authority by default into legislation for day to day decision making.

In our 2024 State of the Nations’ foster care survey we asked foster carers which sort of day-to-day decisions they felt were the most difficult to make for the children in their care. 17% of foster carers’ answers referred to social opportunities – with sleepovers being the most common example. This theme was followed by difficult decisions around healthcare (15%), relationships (14%), childhood experiences, holidays and trips (12%), education (11%), self-expression (10%), parenting decisions (10%) and systemic issues within fostering service staff.

One foster carer told us:

“It has been difficult for the child in my care (4 years) to have sleepovers at her foster nans home with cousins and foster sister. It is quite difficult for us to understand the reasoning behind decisions regarding sleepovers. For example sleepovers in school friends’ houses is permitted - no DBS required and can even share a bed with said friend, yet this does not apply when it is family and my foster daughter wanted to stay with her cousin and foster sister in the same room. It’s always a battle.”

In our 2024 survey we also asked foster carers what the main barriers they face in making decisions for the children in their care. Issues with social services made up the majority of

responses (46%) with 31% of these responses including difficulties with social workers such as a lack of communication, time and respect.

Foster carers tell us that delegated authority by default would mean they are more respected by children's services and have more freedom to make better day-to-day decisions about the children in their care, who they know best.

One foster carer told us their biggest challenge was *"Children's Social Workers who refuse to listen to concerns about the effect their decisions have on the children as they think they know best as they have 'qualifications' even though they don't actually live with these children to see first-hand the effects of their poor decision making"*

Learning and development

We were also disappointed that the policy paper and the recent Bill did not feature any commitments to improving the learning and development (L&D) of foster carers to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to support the children in their care. Most children come into care due to abuse or neglect and often have complex emotional needs. Foster carers have a unique role of caring for children in their homes 24/7, they must be adequately equipped to meet the needs of the child(ren) in their care.

In our 2024 State of the Nations' survey, only 72% of foster carers in England said they have an agreed learning and development plan for the next 12 months. Out of all foster carer respondents, 63% rated their post-approval training as excellent or good. This has decreased considerably from 2021, when 71% of foster carers we surveyed rated their L&D (overall) as excellent or good.

Foster carers survey responses told us they want more training that covers:

- Therapeutic care, including attachment, trauma informed care and life story work.
- Safeguarding, particularly around drugs and alcohol and internet safety.
- Mental health, particularly trauma.
- Neurodiversity, including foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, autism and ADHD.
- Health and disability, including alcohol and drug withdrawal in babies.
- Equality, diversity and inclusion, including caring for LGBTQ+ children and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- Communication needs, including sign language.

Recommendations for the upcoming Children's Wellbeing Bill:

- a) Honour previous government commitments to extend Staying Put, so young people with care experience have the same opportunities to succeed in life as their non-care experienced peers.
- b) Continue the work that was being undertaken to introduce statutory 'opt-out' maximum delegated authority by default for foster carers to make day-to-day decisions on behalf of the children and young people they foster. This should include consulting the fostering sector, foster carers and fostering services on legislative changes.

- c) Invest in the creation, implementation and monitoring of a standardised framework for pre- and post-approval training for foster carers, including opportunities for foster carers to gain qualifications.

3. What measures can be undertaken to improve early intervention?

Step Up Step Down (SUSD)

We were pleased to see the commitment in the 'Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive' policy paper to improve early intervention and ensure that every child can remain with their family where possible. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill mandates that all local authorities offer a family group decision making meeting with parents or others with parental responsibility for the child (FGDM). This will ensure the whole family is involved in planning a response to concerns about a child's safety. We also welcome the £250m investment announced in the local government finance policy statement for a new Children's Social Care Prevention Grant which will allow for local authorities to commission additional preventative services for children and young people. As we stated in our last submission, central government funding for preventative services in local authorities has been underfunded for too long and urgently needed addressing to reduce the numbers of children coming into care and address family's needs before they escalate.

The mandating of FGDM and the new prevention grant provide an opportunity to explore how our Step Up Step Down (SUSD) programme could be utilised in England to facilitate and support FGDM and "recognise and build on the strengths within the family, empowering them to develop solutions to support and protect their children."¹¹ SUSD is a model which we developed in Northern Ireland and are now piloting in two local authorities Wales which uses experienced foster carers to help keep families together, building on strengths and growing resilience. An evaluation of the programme found 95% of the children and young people cared for in the model remain with their birth parents.¹²

SUSD provides holistic, tailored, wrap around, intensive, consistent support over at least 12-15 months. It builds on a 'support care model' and gives parents the support of a trained Family Support Foster Carer (FSFC) who can 'step up' if the family needs additional support and 'step down' when parents are in a better place to support their children.

The FSFCs are fundamental to the success of the programme - they mentor parents, provide practical support and advice, and model and teach good parenting skills. The service is designed to enable them to develop further skills and knowledge which they use in their professional fostering role. Being a FSFC can offer an alternative to mainstream fostering and provide a great retention tool, with many doing it after deciding to finish fostering and others who may otherwise resign or retire. It provides options for carers to make a difference at points in their lives where 24/7 care might be more incompatible.

¹¹ Department for Education (2024) [Keeping children safe, helping families thrive](#).

¹² Flood, R and Thomson, L (2020) Evaluation of the Pilot of Step Up Step Down (SUSD) Programme, RF Associates.

SUSD provides a fostering family community-based model that provides families with mentoring, training and community support with the aim of keeping families together. The programme uses a non-judgemental supportive approach which builds parents' confidence and self-efficacy, providing practical support that allows them to address key issues in the home and make systemic changes in mindset and practices within their families.

Children and young people who enter care often have experienced trauma - 66% of children and young people in England enter care due to abuse or neglect.¹³ Evidence suggests that wrap around care for the whole family, ensuring that they have all the skills and support they need to stay together where safe to do so, leads to improvements in the child's school attendance, family functioning, outcomes and families generally welcome the support provided.¹⁴

Recommendations for the government:

- a) Pilot Step Up Step Down as a support care model in local authorities in England to ensure more families on the edge of care can stay together.
- b) Explore Step Up Step Down as a tool for facilitating and building on FGDM within local authorities in England.

For more information on this submission, please contact Natalie Williams, Head of Policy and Campaigns, The Fostering Network Natalie.Williams@fostering.network.org.uk
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¹³ Department for Education (2024) [Children looked after in England including adoptions](#).

¹⁴ White, C. (2008) Family intervention projects: An evaluation of their design, set-up and early outcomes. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families and Flint, J., Batty, E., Parr, S., Platts-Fowler, D., Nixon, J., & Sanderson, D. (2011) Evaluation of intensive intervention projects. London: Department for Education.